ANTISEMITISM AND THE NAZIS

When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, Jews were living in every country of Europe. A total of roughly nine million Jews lived in the countries that would be occupied by Germany during World War II. These Jewish people were often disliked because of their religion. In European societies - where the population was primarily Christian - Jews found themselves isolated as outsiders. Jews do not share the Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and many Christians considered this refusal to accept Jesus' divinity as arrogant and evil. For centuries the Church taught that Jews were responsible for Jesus' death, not recognizing, as most historians do today, that Jesus was executed by the Roman government because officials viewed him as a political threat to their rule. Added to religious conflicts were economic ones. Rulers placed restrictions on Jews, barring them from holding certain jobs and from owning land.

At the same time, since the early Church did not permit lending money at interest, Jews came to fill the vital (but unpopular) role of moneylenders for the Christian majority. In more desperate times, Jews became scapegoats for many problems people suffered. For example, they were blamed for causing the "Black Death," the plague that killed thousands of people throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. This irrational hatred of Jews - Antisemitism - the starting point for understanding the tragedy that would befall countless numbers of people during the Holocaust.

In 1933, about 500,000 Jews lived in Germany, less than one percent of the total population. Most Jews in Germany were proud to be Germans, citizens of a country that had produced many great poets, writers, musicians, and artists. More than 100,000 German Jews had served in the German army during World War I, and many were decorated for bravery. Although German Jews continued to encounter some discrimination in their social lives and professional careers, most were confident of their future as Germans. They spoke the German language and regarded Germany as their home.

When the Nazis came to power, the lives of German Jews changed drastically. On April 1, 1933, the Nazis carried out the first nationwide, planned action against them: a boycott of Jewish businesses. Nazi spokesmen claimed the boycott was an act of revenge against both German Jews and foreigners, including US and English journalists, who had criticized the Nazi regime. On the day of the boycott, Storm Troopers stood menacingly in front of Jewish-owned shops. The six-pointed "Star of David " was painted in yellow

and black across thousands of doors and windows. Signs were posted saying "Don't Buy from Jews" and "The Jews Are Our Misfortune."

The nationwide boycott marked the beginning of a nationwide campaign by the Nazi party against the entire German Jewish population. A week later, the government passed a law restricting employment in the civil service to "Aryans." Jewish government workers, including teachers in public schools and universities were fired.

At the annual Nazi party rally held in Nuremberg in 1935, Hitler announced new laws which institutionalized many of the racial theories prevalent in Nazi ideology. The laws excluded German Jews from citizenship and prohibited them from marrying persons of "German or related blood." Other laws disenfranchised Jews and deprived them of most political rights. Then the Nazis stepped up the persecution of German Jews. In 1937 and 1938, the government set out to impoverish Jews by requiring them to register their property and then by "Aryanizing" Jewish businesses. This meant that Jewish workers and managers were dismissed, and the ownership of most Jewish businesses was taken over by non-Jewish Germans who bought them at bargain prices fixed by Nazis. Jewish doctors were forbidden to treat non-Jews, and Jewish lawyers were not permitted to practice law.

THE "NIGHT OF BROKEN GLASS"

On the night of November 9, 1938, violence against Jews broke out across the Reich. It appeared to be unplanned, set off by Germans' anger over the assassination of a German official in Paris at the hands of a Jewish teenager. In fact, German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and other Nazis carefully organized the pogroms. In two days, over 250 synagogues were burned, over 7,000 Jewish businesses were trashed and looted, dozens of Jewish people were killed, and Jewish cemeteries, hospitals, schools, and homes were looted while police and fire brigades stood by. The pogroms became known as Kristallnacht, the "Night of Broken Glass," for the shattered glass from the store windows that littered the streets.

The morning after the pogroms 30,000 German Jewish men were arrested for the "crime" of being Jewish and sent to concentration camps, where hundreds of them perished. Some Jewish women were also arrested and sent to local jails. Businesses owned by Jews were not allowed to reopen unless they were managed by non-Jews. Curfews were placed on Jews, limiting the hours of the day they could leave their homes.

After the "Night of Broken Glass," life was even more difficult for German and Austrian Jewish men, women, and children. Already barred from entering museums,

public playgrounds, and swimming pools, children were now expelled from the public schools. Jewish youngsters, like their parents, were totally segregated in Germany. Between 1933 and 1941, the Nazis aimed to make Germany cleansed of Jews by making life so difficult for them that they would be forced to leave the country. By 1938, about 150,000 German Jews, one in four, had already fled the country. After Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, however, an additional 185,000 Jews were brought under Nazi rule. Many Jews were unable to find countries willing to take them in. They would soon be victimized by the Nazi killing machine. By the end of the war, two out of every three of these Jews would be dead, and European Jewish life would be changed forever